



ELECTING PUTIN

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*LOOKING FORWARD TO THE
2018 PRESIDENTIAL RACE*

Given Russia's current political landscape, where elections have become pro forma contests meant to convey the appearance of competition, there is almost no doubt that Vladimir Putin will win the presidential election on March 18, 2018. Despite his assured victory, Putin has repeatedly demurred from saying whether or not he will run, suggesting that election campaigns are detrimental to the normal functioning of the government. According to reports in the Russian media, the Kremlin is formulating a platform focused on Putin's personal accomplishments and his foreign policy. The media also reports that Putin is likely to return to his pre-2012 pattern and run as an independent candidate. This would distance him further from United Russia, a political party that has lost significant ground with voters in recent years due to allegations of corruption. Meanwhile, the field of potential competitors is being cleared. In late June 2017, Russia's Central Election Commission announced that Alexei Navalny, an oppositionist and anticorruption campaigner with a considerable political following, will not be able to run for president. Navalny's ineligibility for political office stems from an embezzlement conviction in a politically motivated case that the European Court of Human Rights has ruled to be an arbitrary application of the law. The prohibition against his candidacy is unlikely to stop Navalny's anticorruption campaign, which has brought tens of thousands of people onto the streets in the spring and summer, yet it effectively prevents the presidential election from becoming a focal point for public dissent.

Minimizing interest in the election and demobilizing opposition voters is the Kremlin's overarching electoral strategy. The approach carries risks but is likely to be successful.

How to Win an Election You Can't Lose

Putin is undeniably popular with Russians. Polling agencies regularly report his approval rating to be around 80 percent and survey research has shown that the numbers are a genuine reflection of people's attitudes.¹ To some extent, Putin's popularity stems from the stability and security that many Russians associate with his leadership. His first two terms in office coincided with an economic recovery and rapid improvement in living standards powered by oil and natural gas exports. His third term as president advanced an aggressive foreign policy targeting countries on Russia's periphery, which resonated with Russians concerned about the country's diminished international standing since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Putin's time in power also corresponds with a transition of the political regime from unconsolidated democracy to stable authoritarianism. The above-mentioned lack of electoral uncertainty is characteristic of an electoral authoritarian regime where elections are regular and relatively free but highly unfair contests. In these regimes, preferred candidates have access to the resources of the state, while their opponents—who are either loyalists without independent political agendas or outsiders—have to contend with administrative hurdles, harassment, and a biased media. Though

Russian president Vladimir Putin, accompanied by Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, second from right, speaks during a meeting focused on Syria and Ukraine with U.S. secretary of state John Kerry at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia, on March 24, 2016 [State Department photo/ Public Domain].

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Riot police during protest on June 12, 2017.

their democratic substance has been significantly diminished, elections still remain the only legitimate route to political power. Moreover, in Russia, as in other authoritarian regimes, winning elections convincingly is an important tool for signaling to supporters and opponents alike that the leader is secure in his or her position. Using fraud to achieve this effect, however, can backfire. This was the case in December 2011, when United Russia won a majority in the parliamentary elections thanks to large-scale electoral malpractice. Evidence of ballot box stuffing and carousel voting circulated online and sparked massive protests across the country that lasted for months. At the time, many observers hailed these antielectoral fraud protests, the

biggest since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the beginning of the end for Putin. However, by summer 2012, a combination of repression and disorganization within the opposition had stalled the movement. Since then, elections have only grown more fraudulent—using forensic techniques, the University of Michigan's Kirill Kalinin and Walter R. Mebane, Jr., have recently shown that as many as two million extra votes were manufactured for United Russia in the 2016 parliamentary election.

The Kremlin's strategies for manipulating elections are multifaceted and extend well beyond fraud. The overall purpose is to discourage opposition-minded segments of the population from participating while ensuring that loyal voters cast a ballot.



Photo courtesy of premier.gov.ru.

To this end, election day for parliamentary and presidential elections has been moved around on the calendar to maximize both inconvenience to certain voters and symbolic value. As of 2013, parliamentary, regional, and local elections have been moved to a single day of voting in September. This means that campaigning now takes place in August, when most Russians, particularly those living in urban areas where support for the Kremlin is typically lower, are on vacation. Election day itself coincides with the start of the academic year, making it difficult for teenagers and university students—a steadily growing contingent of antiregime protesters—to show their dissent.

The upcoming 2018 presidential election is no different. Earlier this

year, the Kremlin rescheduled election day to fall on the fourth anniversary of the official incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation. This will attract voters who were in favor of Crimea's annexation and also highlight Putin's foreign policy, an aspect of his administration that is very popular.

Voter turnout in Russian elections, at all levels, has been decreasing. In the 2012 presidential election, it was 4 percent lower than in 2008. Turnout for the 2016 parliamentary election was at an all-time low, at just 48 percent. In major urban centers, such as Moscow, turnout was below 30 percent. Russians may decide not to vote against Putin, but they may also choose not to vote at all. And this poses a serious problem for the Kremlin. In the absence of real polit-

ical competition, electoral legitimacy must be derived from voter turnout. By ridding himself of affiliation with United Russia and disallowing opposition candidates like Navalny to appear on the ballot, Putin could potentially depress interest among average voters—a strategy that is not without risk. However, the regime has ways to ensure that the voters who matter—loyal voters—cast a ballot.

Reversing Accountability

Russia's political regime is permeated by clientelism—the unequal and targeted distribution of material benefits in return for political support—with Putin as the ultimate patron. Instead of voters holding politicians accountable for their promises, the reverse



Top to bottom: Balloons flying into the sky on Russia Day protests, June 2017; 2007 Duma elections campaign billboard, “Moscow Votes for Putin. Vote No. 10,” in Manezhnaya Square, Moscow, Russia (photo by Leonid Dzhepko); yellow rubber duck as an anticorruption protest symbol in Russia, photographed (by Daggetts) during the protest on March 26, 2017, in Chelyabinsk.

is true, with politicians using state resources to reward or punish voters in a relationship that Susan Stokes of Yale University has dubbed “perverse accountability.” Scholars researching Russia have found that politicians and agents of the state are able to target socioeconomically vulnerable voters. For example, Inga A.-L. Saikkonen of Åbo Akademi University argues that rural voters living in geographically concentrated communities, such as former collective farms, are deeply dependent on the state for subsidies and can be easily monitored to ensure voting for regime-backed candidates. Similarly, survey research carried out by Timothy Frye, Ora John Reuter, and David Szakonyi has shown that state-owned firms or firms doing business with the state were more likely to hold political events in the workplace and ask their employees to vote for regime-backed candidates. Most worryingly, the authors found that 15 percent of employees surveyed believed that their employer was able to monitor if and how they voted.

In regions where voters are less susceptible to economic mobilization, the regime has to be careful to avoid heavy-handed malpractice that can trigger protest. My own research on the connection between civil society mobilization and elections in Russia has shown that “noisier” protest regions tend to have more competitive elections. Here too, however, the regime has taken steps to limit the ability of civil society to aid electoral competition. Since 2012, many well-established civil society groups, including Memorial and Golos, have been labeled foreign agents, a designation that limits funding and their ability to operate. And, according to a new law passed

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in 2016, election observers must register three days before the vote, ensuring that the regime has ample warning about which areas will be monitored for malpractice.

An Autocrat's Exit

Next year, Vladimir Putin will begin his last constitutionally permitted six-year term as president. Affairs in Russia, while stable, are not rosy. Oil prices are down, and ordinary Russians are feeling the economic brunt of countersanctions imposed by the Kremlin. Anticorruption protests, along with other socioeconomic protests, are attracting many thousands of participants across Russian cities. Emigration—even by official, heavily manipulated statistics—is back up to mid-1990s levels, with many educated young Russians leaving the country as the government continues to cut funding for universities and scientific research.

The biggest challenge facing Putin in his last term, however, is his eventual exit from politics. In personalistic regimes, leaders are likely to be punished after losing power. Abel Escribà-Folch of Universitat Pompeu Fabra notes that almost half of all autocrats who lost power between 1946 and 2004 were exiled, killed, or imprisoned. Ironically, it is the structure of the political system these autocrats have created—centered on the decision-making of a single leader and his or her close circle of allies—that leads to this type of “irregular exit.” Personalistic regimes have weak institutions and are therefore unable to channel political demands from the public or opposition parties. Over time, the leader in power also tends to eliminate allies that cultivate independent support, leaving few viable candidates for a successor. And yet, for those who would be happy to see Putin go, it is important to remember that since 1945 only about one-quarter of leadership changes in autocracies have resulted in democratization.² With or without Putin, Russia's democratic future is uncertain. ■

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¹ See Timothy Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle L. Marquardt, and Ora John Reuter, “Is Putin's Popularity Real?” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2017): 1–15.

² See Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, “Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 2 (2014): 313–331.